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## Challenges for International Students in Malaysia: Culture, Climate and Care.

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges experienced by International students in Malaysia. Data is collected through focus group interviews with international students from various countries studying at three public funded universities. Themes emerged include culture, climate, and care. Findings of the study provide guidance to university management in Malaysia to improve preparations in receiving international students.

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*Keywords:* International Students, Cultural Diversity, Values, Climate, Care, Malaysia.

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### 1. Introduction

#### *1.1 Challenges faced by International Students*

Studies have shown international students experience challenges adjusting to food, weather, financial arrangement, health care, accommodation and local language, while financial and language limitations add to the difficulties for the new comers (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Lin & Yi, 1997; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Poor English language proficiency limits the ability of international students to be fully involved in learning, and trying to adjust to different dialect and slangs of the local tutors escalate the challenge for international students.

Understanding local language helps international students to interact with local folks and to better understand local culture. Competency in the local language helps international students to start social interaction, to discuss with university staff and faculty members, and also to settle down at their new places. On the other hand, failure to

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interact with local people may cause cultural shocks and miscommunication which can lead to lack of social support (Chen, 1999). Failure to adjust to new environment will cause international students to experience psychological symptoms (Tseng et al. 2002; Lin et al. 1997; Mori, 2000) such as feelings of inferiority, confusion, home sickness, loneliness, anxiety anger, isolation, lost of identities, insomnia, low motivation, unable to focus and lacking in self confidence.

### *1.2 International Students in Malaysia*

The number of international students in Malaysia has increased from 30 thousand in the year 2003 to 70 thousand in 2010 (MOHE 2010). Most of the international students originated from Southeast Asia, Middle Eastern countries, Middle Asia, and African countries, and a minimal number from Europe. Malaysian universities use a mixture of English and Bahasa Melayu as medium of instruction. However, when international students are involved, especially for postgraduate programs, English and Arabic are used, depending on the nature and needs of their studies.

Cultural diversity through internationalization is supported by the Malaysian government. This is evident by in bound and out bound mobility programs in local universities. The influx of international students, visitors, and expatriate as well as workers has contributed to the building of social, economic and political networking between Malaysia and other countries. At the same time, this phenomenon has created new subcultures in the country. Certain towns in Malaysia are flavored with international ambiance through the existence of international population and international housing areas, as well as shopping outlets and restaurants serving international delights.

While supportive policies and impressive infrastructure has been prepared to facilitate internationalization, there are still some elements that may be considered either challenges or benefits for international visitors, depending on how it is viewed. Malaysia Culture is predominantly influenced by the Asian culture and the Islamic religion. Some observable values include shyness, limited expression of feelings, respect for others, and a collectivistic lifestyle. As public expressions of feelings are cautiously done, a shy or respectful Malaysian maybe wrongly interpreted as aloof. In situations where a Malaysian does not approve of a public behavior, he or she will just show disapproval through a 'sour' facial express, instead of directly telling the person to stop. On the other hand, once accepted by the local society, a foreigner can expect to enjoy family type of treatment; being called "adopted brother or sister", and brought around to visit other family members, share many colorful festivities such as weddings, religious festivals, and New Year celebrations.

Another challenge or again benefit for foreigners is the single hot season in Malaysia, which can be translated as summer all year round. Those who enjoy the sun and outdoor activities will appreciate the simplicity of wearing light clothing and bask in the warmth of bright sunshine all day long. Pouring rain is a welcomed cooling process when it gets too hot, but some people may not like the surprise. On the extreme end, prolonged exposure to the sun or the rain however, will cause fever, thus Malaysians are cautious about this aspect.

International students in Malaysia enjoy equal learning opportunity with local students. In fact they get extra support from university personnel with immigration processes, transportation from airports, and temporary accommodation. International students are also provided with Bahasa Melayu and English classes in order to prepare them for academic and social activities. Some international students are supported by research grants of their supervisors as well as university awards. While universities set up their facilities, international students must also prepare to enter by getting information concerning geographical areas, educational system and cultural backgrounds of the host country (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Hyun, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

This study examines the challenges faced by international students in Malaysia. Information gathered is useful for university management to better understand and better prepared when dealing with international students.

## **2. Method**

Data is gathered by focus group interviews on 30 international students. Six focus groups were conducted; each group consists of 5-6 international students. The groups were homogenous whereby the members were from the same country of origin or almost similar cultures. The groups were students from South East Asia (Thailand & Indonesia), African Continent (two groups), China, and Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia). The data was audio taped, transcribed and managed by NVIVO7.

### 3. Findings And Discussion

#### 3.1 Challenges Faced by International Students in Malaysia

Three major themes that emerged are namely culture, climate, and care. Culture appeared most talked about in the focus group. Elements in culture that were seen as challenges by the international students were language, values, food, and sanitation practices of Malaysian society.

#### 3.2 Language

Language is one of the basic aspect for adjustment process. Poor English and Bahasa Melayu proficiency on the part of the students, and their difficulty in understanding local dialect and slangs may hinder adjustment process (Tseng et al. 2002, Lin et al. 1997, Chen, 1999).

*“Malaysian people don’t speak English, it is quite difficult for me to understand what they mean. But after one year, I become better”.*

*“The accent is just different, the people speaking English, but they sound Malay”.*

*“Because my course is conducted in Bahasa Melayu, I face a lot of problems”.*

#### 3.3 Values

Language ability also helps international students to interact with local folks and to better understand local culture and values. Furnham & Bochner (1982) found that students from countries nearer in distance and culture adjust better because they are familiar with the language and values of the host country. Students from countries dissimilar in culture often face cultural shock over the different values. The Malaysian culture which stresses limitations in public and direct expressions especially towards strangers can easily be misinterpreted as a form of aloofness. Misinterpretations of certain behaviors may lead to social isolation. Statements from the students below portray contradicting perceptions of international students regarding the values of Malaysians.

#### 3.4 Values in Interaction

*“Their culture is quite different from Nigeria”.*

*“My neighbour was a lecturer here in this university. 3 months (I stay here) I never say salam to her and she never say salam to me”..*

*“Sometimes they are not friendly because we are black. Malaysian perceive blacks as smelly”.*

*“if we meet the Malaysian in the campus especially in this university, they are very friendly and respectful. And they even greet you before you greet them. I feel around this university people are very nice and friendly.”.*

#### 3.5 Values in Cleanliness

Values regarding cleanliness is also differently perceived by students from different regions. International students like those from middle East feel that sanitation in Malaysia needs to be improved. On the other hand others from South East Asia comply with the standards, perhaps because they are familiar with the same values.

*“I think people here should upgrade their sanitary. Sometimes in restaurants you don’t find any hand washing liquid”*

*“The people don’t care about trash. This is a rich country, everyday you have lots of rain, and you must have a good service to collect your garbage and trash. Unfortunately there is no, especially during holidays, and your country is full of holidays”..*

*“Other University I don’t know, but my university is very clean”.*

### 3.6 Climate

Other than culture, the students also complain about the Malaysian humid climate. Adjusting to the new climate is something that international students anywhere have to endure. Thus, international students must also have information regarding geographical aspects of their targeted country. Unfortunately, description on paper is never equal to personal experience. International students will not know exactly what a countries’ weather is like until they personally experience the situation.

*“If you compare to my country, it’s really hot...sometimes I feel dizzy because of the weather. Because in Malaysia it has only 1 season, it does not change.*

*“During the day sometimes it is hot, and sometimes it rains. Like you don’t know when they come. Sometimes silently. Some students could not take it and sometimes we suffer fever and sneezing.”*

### 3.7 Care

Sumer, Poyrazli & Graham (2008) mentioned that universities that provide sufficient support services help international students to better adjust. International students in Malaysia have positive views of facilities in the universities, indicating that Malaysian universities have taken the right steps in this aspect. However, most international students agree that it is the ‘care’ that is lacking. Dissatisfactions are voiced regarding dirty hostels, unpredictable bus schedules, inefficient doctors at the university health centers, and the lack of English usage on signage and documents.

*“My university is excellent when talk about facilities. Very fantastic housing”.*

*“I use library, swimming pool, complex, gym field all the services in this university is very good”.*

*“Like us undergraduate, I’m not comfortable about hostel, our hostel somehow is dirty, some toilets you cannot enter”.*

*“And about the clinic, unfortunately the doctors are not very experts in their job. I got dengue a few months ago, and they could not diagnose for me. I go to clinic outside and they told me that I have dengue”*

*“In other university, the signs are in English, but just in this university everything is in Malay... For the first month I came here I didn’t know what perpustakaan means, we were searching for the library but everything was written in Malay”.*

## 4. Conclusions

International students in Malaysia face adjustment regarding culture, climate, and care. A few factors are found to help International students better adjust. These include, familiarity and similarity of culture, language ability, and efficient services at the institution. Malaysian universities should improve services to compliment the high-quality campus infrastructure. Efficient international offices, multicultural trained student personnel, and support programs built for international students will help improve services for international students. University language centers need to be empowered to ensure that international students secure their language ability before joining the

academic programs. On the students' part, good performance in both local language and English language help international students to learn about local culture and to enable them make the most of their study experience in Malaysia.

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